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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 003589

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DHAHRAN SENDS  
PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/10/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [KIRF](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: SHI'A CLERIC DISCUSSES SLOW BUT SIGNIFICANT  
CHANGES INSIDE KSA

REF: RIYADH 3301

Classified by Consul General John Kincannon for reason 1.4  
(d).

¶1. (C) In a meeting with PolOff on April 28, Shi'a cleric Faisal Al-Awami gave a broadly positive account of changes in Saudi Arabia over the past 10 to 15 years. Al-Awami, who, like many of his politically and religiously active Shi'a colleagues, studied in Iran and Syria starting in the early 1980s, began with the caveat that change in Saudi Arabia, even if impressive when viewed over time, was very slow. "Young people in our community are impatient. They cannot see these changes. Instead, they compare the situation here to what they see in other countries like Bahrain and Kuwait and they question why we are willing to be patient. But those like myself in the middle generations think that Saudi Arabia is almost a different country from 10 to 15 years ago."

¶2. (C) Al-Awami described three changes at length. First, he praised increased discussion of Shi'a issues in the media. In addition to the airing of Shi'a perspectives on Arab satellite channels, he noted that Saudi newspapers have recently raised Shi'a issues as well. As examples, Al-Awami cited a decision by the conservative Al-Medina newspaper to publish a rejoinder he drafted to an article that attacked the Shi'a, as well as Al-Watan's decision to publish an article by a Sunni in response to President Mubarak's public questioning of Shi'a loyalties in which the author argued that Shi'a did have legitimate grievances and that the way to resolve any potential questions about loyalty was to address those grievances. Secondly, Al-Awami expressed his enthusiasm for the growth in Sunni-Shi'a dialogue in the Kingdom. This dialogue began after the first Gulf war, he explained, when some Sunni opposition figures reached out to the Shi'a opposition, yet it was the fall of Saddam Hussein that, in Al-Awami's view, led to a broader base of contacts between Sunnis and Shi'a. Many Saudi Sunnis were curious about and impressed with the positions taken by Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq, he claimed; they then began to seek more information about their Shi'a fellow citizens. Saudi Sunnis were contacting him with questions through his website ([www.alawami.org](http://www.alawami.org)), he continued, and, on a more elite level, a number of Sunni leaders who once held hardline views toward the Shi'a, like Ayedh Al-Gurni and the chief Sharia' judge in Qatif, were visiting forums in Qatif and participating with Shi'a in the National Dialogue. Finally, Al-Awami praised a newfound openness to dialogue sponsored by civil society, citing the forums springing up throughout the country (reftel) and crediting Minister of Information and Culture Iyad Al-Medani's supportive position. Al-Awami opined that the SAG wanted to encourage these developments but had to proceed cautiously for fear of backlash from religious

conservatives.

¶3. (C) Probed by PolOff on whether any Shi'a groups, such as Saudi Hezbollah, would contemplate resorting to violence against the SAG in protest against Shi'a grievances or for any other reason, Al-Awami responded, "We know the clerics here who are part of Saudi Hezbollah and talk with them frequently. They, and even the core members of the group living in Iran, would not support violence against the government. They saw what happened after the explosions at Ras Tanura, when all Shi'a were punished for the acts of a few individuals. It was terrible for the community." (Note:

Al-Awami was referring to an explosion at an Aramco gas plant at Ras Tanura in the mid- 1980s that was ascribed to Shi'a perpetrators. End note.) As for his own views on the ideal relationship between government and the religious establishment, Al-Awami said he believed that there should be a process by which clerics had the opportunity to vet government decisions for conformance to the Sharia'. "But the form this process takes, he continued, "will naturally vary from country to country. This process is what I consider to be wilayat al-faqih."

¶4. (C) Bio note and comment: PolOff was introduced to Al-Awami by another Shi'a contact as an active preacher and lecturer in Qatif and a participant in political dialogue within the Shi'a community. We expect based on his account of where he studied that he is one of the "Shirazis," a loose-knit group of former exiles who returned to the Kingdom in the early to mid 1990s. His comments on Saudi Hezbollah track with what post has heard from other contacts, namely that its leaders do not currently support violence as a tactic and that there is open dialogue between Hezbollah clerics and their more moderate counterparts in Qatif. End

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bio note and comment.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)  
GFOELLER